

Strategic Autonomy and Self-Reliance in Vietnam's Foreign Policy After the 14th National Congress – A Comparison with the Strategies of Middle Powers in the Context of Us-China Competition

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ABSTRACT: The 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (2026) added two breakthrough perspectives to the foreign policy line: “strategic autonomy” and “self-reliance.” These concepts not only inherit the tradition of “independence and self-reliance” but also represent a new development, consistent with the historical stature, culture, and new position of Vietnam after 40 years of Doi Moi. At the same time, they constitute a proactive response to the increasingly polarized international landscape dominated by US-China strategic competition. The Political Report of the 14th Congress affirms: “Strategic autonomy, self-reliance, self-confidence, and strong progress in the era of the nation’s rise” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 1). The article provides an in-depth analysis of the new connotations of these two concepts through official documents, including the Political Report of the 14th Congress and the guidance document of the Party Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2026). Using a comparative approach, the article contrasts Vietnam’s application of “strategic autonomy” with the approaches of India (Strategic Autonomy), Indonesia (Bebas-Aktif), and Turkey in the context of US-China competition. On this basis, the study proposes the Vietnamese Strategic Autonomy Model (VSAM) consisting of four pillars and a Party-led multilateral diplomacy model. Through this model, the article evaluates the adaptability of “bamboo diplomacy” in an increasingly polarized international environment in which middle powers face pressure to choose sides or be drawn into alliance blocs. The research results indicate that although Vietnam’s model demonstrates greater flexibility and resilience than some other cases, it still faces major challenges concerning endogenous capacity, economic-political risks, and technological pressure. The article concludes that strengthening comprehensive self-reliance will determine the practical effectiveness of strategic autonomy in the coming period and proposes the Party-led multilateral diplomacy model as an optimal institutional framework for Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: Strategic autonomy, self-reliance, Vietnam’s foreign policy, 14th National Congress, bamboo diplomacy, middle powers, US-China competition, VSAM model, multilateral diplomacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context and urgency of the research problem

In the context of profound transformations in the international order, strategic competition between the United States and China has become the structural factor shaping contemporary international relations (Allison, 2017; Beckley & Brands, 2022). The Political Report of the 14th Congress of the Party assesses: “The world situation is undergoing rapid, unprecedentedly complex changes toward multipolarity, multiple centers, multiple layers, strong fragmentation, and polarization. Peace, cooperation, and development remain the major trends, yet they face many new challenges” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 15). In particular, the Report emphasizes: “Major powers and centers of power continue to adjust their strategies, competing and cooperating at the same time, compromising, but competition will become increasingly fierce” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 15). Middle and small powers are compelled to adjust their strategies to protect national interests without falling into dependence or direct confrontation. This trend is also clearly recognized in the Political Report: “The trend toward strategic autonomy, economic competition, and the promotion of green transformation, digital transformation, energy transformation, structural transformation, and human resource quality transformation... is increasingly receiving attention and promotion from countries” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 16).

In this context, Vietnam has emerged as a typical case with the addition of two key concepts at the 14th National Congress: “strategic autonomy” and “self-reliance.” The Asia-Pacific region, where Vietnam is located, continues to be the center of great-power competition. The Political Report states: “The Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions continue to be dynamic centers of development, yet they are also focal points of strategic competition between major powers. Territorial and maritime disputes,

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including those in the East Sea, continue to evolve in complex ways, carrying the potential risk of conflict” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 16). This situation creates an urgent need to build a foreign policy strategy with a clear theoretical system and practical model.

1.2. Research objectives

The study has four main objectives: (i) to clarify the new connotations of “strategic autonomy” and “self-reliance” in the foreign policy line after the 14th National Congress; (ii) to compare Vietnam's approach with three representative middle powers—India, Indonesia, and Turkey; (iii) to propose a research model explaining the operational capacity of Vietnam's strategy in the polarized US-China environment; and (iv) to propose a multilateral diplomacy model under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

1.3. Structure of the article

The article is structured into nine parts: after the introduction, part 2 presents the literature review; part 3 presents the theoretical basis and research methodology; part 4 analyzes the new connotations of strategic autonomy and self-reliance; part 5 conducts a comparison with middle powers; part 6 evaluates the adaptability of bamboo diplomacy; part 7 proposes the multilateral diplomacy model; part 8 discusses challenges and opportunities; and part 9 presents the conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. International research on strategic autonomy

The concept of “strategic autonomy” has been studied extensively in contemporary international relations. According to Howorth (2019), strategic autonomy refers to the ability of a country or alliance to make independent decisions without being dominated by external powers. The concept was initially developed primarily in the European context, especially when the European Union sought to build defense capabilities independent of NATO (Howorth, 2019; Tocci, 2021). However, in the 2020s, the concept has been extended to developing countries and middle powers in Asia. In the Asian context, Kuik (2016, 2021) and Goh (2016) argue that small and middle powers often adopt a “hedging” strategy—combining diversification of relations, strengthening internal capacity, and selective participation in multilateral mechanisms to minimize risks. Kuik (2021) clearly distinguishes hedging (strategic hedging) from balancing and bandwagoning, arguing that many Southeast Asian countries employ a mixed strategy rather than a single approach. Acharya (2017) in *The End of American World Order* contends that the world order is shifting from a US-dominated unipolar model to a “multiplex” model in which countries at various levels have their own roles and space for action. This provides an important theoretical foundation for middle powers such as Vietnam to pursue strategic autonomy. Mearsheimer (2018), from the perspective of offensive realism, argues that US-China competition is structurally inevitable and will force smaller countries to choose sides. However, Walt (2018) and Posen (2014) counter that countries can maintain a position of strategic neutrality if they build sufficiently strong endogenous capabilities. Tunsjø (2018) adds that the return of bipolarity creates both risks and opportunities for middle powers, depending on their diplomatic capacity and geostrategic position.

2.2. International research on middle powers

Regarding middle powers, Cooper, Higgott, and Nossal (1993) developed the classic theoretical framework, defining middle powers through three criteria: position in the power hierarchy, diplomatic behavior, and national identity. Jordaan (2003) distinguishes two types: “traditional middle powers” (such as Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands) and “emerging middle powers” (such as India, Indonesia, Turkey, Brazil, and Vietnam). The latter group typically employs flexible diplomacy, leverages geopolitical position, and builds national image to increase influence. Dal (2023, 2024) has recently expanded the concept of middle powers in a multipolar world, arguing that this group plays an increasingly important role as “bridge states” and “mediator states” as the international order becomes more fragmented. Womack (2022) analyzes asymmetrical relationships between major and smaller powers, showing that smaller powers can maximize strategic space by exploiting competition between major powers.

2.3. Domestic research on Vietnam's foreign policy

Within Vietnam, research on the country's foreign policy line has developed strongly since Doi Moi in 1986. Nguyen Vu Tung (2021) has systematized the evolution of Vietnam's foreign policy from “multilateralization and diversification” (7th National Congress, 1991) to “comprehensive strategic partnership” (2013–2026), demonstrating the consistency and continuous development of Vietnamese foreign policy thinking. Pham Quang Minh (2025) analyzes Vietnam's foreign policy in the “new era,” emphasizing the shift from “passive integration” to “proactive integration.” Le Hong Hiep (2022) at the ISEAS Institute (Singapore) analyzed Vietnam's hedging strategy, showing that Vietnam employs a combination of tools: diversifying security partnerships, participating in multilateral mechanisms, developing multidimensional economic relations, and building autonomous defense capacity. Vuving (2023) adds that Vietnam is developing a “Vietnam-specific Indo-Pacific strategy” that combines economic interests with security and bilateral with multilateral relations. Tran Truong Thuy (2023) in *The Pacific Review* analyzed Vietnam's “balancing act” in the East Sea, demonstrating how Vietnam applies international law, multilateral diplomacy, and maritime capacity building to protect sovereignty without escalating conflict. Thayer (2024) assesses that the 14th National Congress marks an important shift in

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Vietnamese foreign policy thinking, from “flexible response” to “proactive shaping.” The Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (2024) published the monograph *Vietnam's Bamboo Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, systematizing the theory of bamboo diplomacy and placing it in comparative perspective with other diplomatic schools in the region. This work particularly emphasizes the “endogenous” nature of Vietnam's diplomatic model, distinguishing it from models borrowed from the West.

2.4. Research gap

Although existing studies have provided a rich theoretical and practical foundation, several important gaps remain. First, no study has systematically compared Vietnam's “strategic autonomy” with that of other middle powers within a consistent analytical framework. Second, previous studies have not fully analyzed the new connotations of this concept in the 14th National Congress documents, especially the dialectical relationship between “strategic autonomy” and “self-reliance.” Third, no theoretical model has been proposed to explain how Vietnam operates strategic autonomy under the leadership of the Communist Party—a unique institutional variable not fully accounted for in Western models. Fourth, no study has proposed a multilateral diplomacy model suited to the specific characteristics of Vietnam's political system.

3. THEORETICAL BASIS, ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK, AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Theoretical basis

The study is based on three main theoretical foundations. First, the structural realism of Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2018) provides the analytical framework for the systemic pressure faced by middle powers in a polarized structure. However, the study goes beyond the limits of realism by integrating Kuik's (2016, 2021) hedging theory, which allows explanation of the flexible, non-linear behavior of countries that do not wish to choose sides clearly. Second, middle power theory by Cooper et al. (1993) and Jordaan (2003) provides the classification and comparative framework. The study expands this framework by integrating the political institutional variable, particularly the leadership role of the Communist Party—an element that traditional middle power theories (developed in liberal democratic contexts) have not fully accounted for. Third, Ho Chi Minh's thought on foreign policy and Vietnam's diplomatic tradition provide an identity-based foundation for the analysis. Ho Chi Minh's famous statement—“A nation that does not rely on its own strength but waits for help from other nations is not worthy of independence” (Ho Chi Minh, 1961)—is regarded as the ideological origin of the concept of “self-reliance” in contemporary foreign policy. The Political Report of the 14th Congress continues this tradition when it affirms: “Strongly arousing the patriotic tradition, the aspiration for development, the spirit of solidarity, and the will for autonomy, self-confidence, self-reliance, self-strengthening, and national pride” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 17).

3.2. Vietnamese Strategic Autonomy Model (VSAM)

On the basis of the above theories, the study proposes the Vietnamese Strategic Autonomy Model (VSAM). The model consists of four closely interacting pillars:

Pillar 1 – Endogenous self-reliance foundation: Includes economic strength, national defense, science and technology, ideology, and internal political stability. This is the prerequisite condition for autonomy not to remain a mere slogan. The Political Report affirms the goal of “promoting breakthrough development of the national defense industry, security industry, autonomy, self-reliance, self-strengthening, dual-use, and modernization” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 32) and “perfecting institutions to enhance the autonomy of the economy and the effectiveness of international economic integration” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 20).

Pillar 2 – Flexible multi-level diplomacy: Expressed through “bamboo diplomacy”—firm in principle yet flexible in adaptation, combining the three pillars of foreign affairs (Party, State, and People). The Political Report clearly states: “Supplement and perfect institutions to maximize the role of the three pillars: Party foreign affairs, State diplomacy, and people-to-people diplomacy, creating the combined strength of Vietnam's pioneering, comprehensive, and modern diplomacy” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 21).

Pillar 3 – Highly institutionalized coordination mechanism: Centralized and unified leadership by the Party, close coordination among National Defense–Security–Foreign Affairs, and a strategic forecasting and advisory mechanism. The Political Report requires: “Ensure the unified leadership of the Party and the centralized management of the State over foreign affairs activities” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 33).

Pillar 4 – Goal of sustainably elevating national position: Not only protecting core interests but also contributing responsibility to regional and international peace, consistent with the aspiration to “stand shoulder to shoulder with the world's powers” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 47) and the objective of “raising Vietnam's role and position in world politics, the global economy, and human civilization” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

The VSAM model is illustrated as a dynamic system in which the “self-reliance” pillar is the foundation, “flexible diplomacy” is the tool, the “coordination mechanism” is the controller, and “elevating national position” is the output. This model differs from

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India's "Multi-alignment," Indonesia's "Bebas-Aktif" (emphasizing ASEAN centrality), and Turkey's "transactional autonomy" (opportunity-oriented).

3.3. Research methodology

The study employs a qualitative method with a multidimensional approach, integrating three main tools:

- (1) Content analysis: Examining and dissecting official Party documents (especially the Draft Political Report of the 14th National Congress and the documents of the 13th National Congress) to quantify and qualify the shift in policy language from "independence and self-reliance" to "strategic autonomy."
- (2) Comparative case study: Based on the framework of George and Bennett (2005), the article compares Vietnam's strategy with those of India, Indonesia, and Turkey across the dimensions of doctrine, institutions, flexibility, and structural pressure.
- (3) Contextual and SWOT analysis: Assessing risks, strengths, and limitations of the "bamboo diplomacy" model, thereby providing an empirical basis for proposing the multilateral diplomacy model (PLMD).

4. NEW PERSPECTIVES ON STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND SELF-RELIANCE IN THE 14TH NATIONAL CONGRESS FOREIGN POLICY LINE

4.1. Development from "independence and self-reliance" to "strategic autonomy"

The evolution of the concept of autonomy in Vietnam's foreign policy can be divided into four main stages. Stage 1 (1986–2000): "Multilateralization and diversification"—Vietnam abandoned the "one-sided" policy and began expanding relations. Stage 2 (2001–2010): "Independence and self-reliance"—affirming the principle of no military alliances and the "four no's." Stage 3 (2011–2025): "Proactive and positive integration"—upgrading partnership relations and deeper participation in multilateral mechanisms. Stage 4 (from 2026): "Strategic autonomy and self-reliance"—elevating from a diplomatic principle to a comprehensive national strategy.

The Political Report of the 14th National Congress has elevated autonomy from the traditional level of "independence and self-reliance" to the level of "strategic autonomy." The title of the Report explicitly states: "strategic autonomy, self-reliance, self-confidence, and strong progress in the era of the nation's rise" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 1). In the guiding principles section, the 14th National Congress defines: "Firmly uphold, apply, and creatively develop Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, and the theory of the Doi Moi line; ... strategic autonomy, renovate the development model, use development to ensure stability, and use stability to promote rapid and sustainable national development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 17).

4.2. New connotations of "strategic autonomy"

The concept of "strategic autonomy" in the 14th National Congress is understood at multiple levels. At the foreign policy level, it means the ability to proactively orient the foreign policy line, resolutely protect core interests (sovereignty, territory, and regime security), while flexibly exploiting contradictions and strategic gaps between major powers. The Political Report emphasizes: "Ensure and protect to the highest degree national and ethnic interests on the basis of the fundamental principles of international law and the United Nations Charter" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, pp. 18, 33). At the development level, "strategic autonomy" is linked to "renovating the development model" and "properly resolving the relationship between domestic production autonomy and participation in global production networks and value chains" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 23). This shows that the 14th National Congress does not understand strategic autonomy in the sense of "self-isolation" or "closing the door," but rather as the ability to engage in integration from a proactive, selective position without becoming dependent. At the national defense and security level, "strategic autonomy" is manifested in the requirement to "promote breakthrough development of the national defense industry and security industry—autonomous, self-reliant, self-strengthening, dual-use, and modern" and to "prevent the risk of war and conflict, and protect the Fatherland from early and from afar" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, pp. 5, 32).

4.3. "Self-reliance" – the endogenous foundation of strategic autonomy

"Self-reliance" is viewed as two sides of a unified whole with autonomy. The development goals of the 14th National Congress clearly state: "strategic autonomy, self-reliance, self-confidence, and strong progress in the new era of the nation" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 18). This shows that "self-reliance" is not merely a slogan but the material and spiritual condition for autonomy. The connotations of "self-reliance" include multiple dimensions:

- (i) economic self-reliance – building an economy with international competitiveness, per capita GDP reaching USD 8,500 by 2030, and an annual growth rate of 10% (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 18);
- (ii) technological self-reliance – prioritizing the development of semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and "gradually mastering production technology in certain emerging industries" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 22);
- (iii) defense self-reliance – building armed forces that are "revolutionary, regular, elite, and modern" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 32);

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(iv) cultural and human self-reliance – “strongly arousing the spirit of patriotism, autonomy, self-confidence, self-reliance, self-strengthening, and national pride” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 25).

4.4. Foreign affairs as “vital and regular”

An important new point in the 14th National Congress is the affirmation that “strengthening national defense, security, and promoting foreign affairs and international integration are vital and regular tasks” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 17). Compared with the 13th National Congress (2021), which used the phrase “important,” upgrading to “vital and regular” shows the Party’s clear awareness of the growing risk of non-traditional security threats and the danger of being drawn into great-power conflict. The foreign policy line is clearly defined: “Consistently implement the foreign policy line of independence, self-reliance, self-strengthening, peace, friendship, cooperation, and development; multilateralize and diversify foreign relations; develop foreign affairs in the new era, commensurate with the historical stature, culture, and position of the country” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 33).

5. COMPARISON WITH THE STRATEGIES OF MIDDLE POWERS

5.1. India and the Strategic Autonomy strategy

India possesses the longest tradition of “Strategic Autonomy” among middle powers. From the Non-Aligned Movement under Nehru to “Multi-alignment” under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has consistently sought to maintain distance from both the United States and China. Its participation in the Quad without signing a military alliance treaty, while continuing to purchase weapons from Russia, is clear evidence of “Multi-alignment” (Hall, 2016; Tellis, 2022). India has clear structural advantages: large territorial size (3.3 million km²), population of 1.4 billion, nuclear weapons, de facto permanent seat in the G20, and a geostrategic position far from the center of East Sea conflict. However, India faces direct border conflicts with China (Ladakh, 2020) and Pakistan, along with enormous internal economic development challenges. Compared with Vietnam, the two countries share similarities in consistently adhering to the principle of no military alliances. However, India exhibits a more clearly offensive strategic initiative (building Quad linkages and participating in the Indo-Pacific Strategy), whereas Vietnam is more defensive and pragmatic due to direct pressure from China in the East Sea (Storey, 2024; Buszynski, 2021).

5.2. Indonesia and the Bebas-Aktif principle

Indonesia has a foreign policy doctrine closest to Vietnam’s. The principle of “Bebas-Aktif” (Independent and Active) was established by Vice President Mohammad Hatta in 1948 and has been maintained for decades (Laksmana, 2020). Indonesia also emphasizes ASEAN centrality and opposes the internationalization of East Sea disputes in ways that increase tensions. Indonesia enjoys greater “strategic depth” than Vietnam due to its greater geographic distance from China and its status as the world’s largest archipelagic nation. Jakarta can pursue a “dynamic equilibrium” policy more comfortably. However, Indonesia also faces its own challenges: limited defense capacity, internal fragmentation among islands, and an “inward-looking” tendency in foreign policy during the post-Jokowi period. Compared with Vietnam, Indonesia has higher theoretical consistency (Bebas-Aktif has existed for nearly 80 years), but weaker institutionalization and inter-agency coordination. Vietnam has an advantage in the centralized leadership of the Party, which allows faster and more synchronized coordination among foreign affairs, defense, and economy.

5.3. Turkey and the Transactional Autonomy model

Turkey under President Erdogan pursues a highly opportunistic form of autonomy (transactional autonomy) (Özkan, 2019; Dal & Kurşun, 2022). The purchase of Russia’s S-400 system while remaining a NATO member clearly exemplifies the “transactional” diplomatic style—leveraging its position as a bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia to maximize benefits. Turkey’s model is highly personalized, closely tied to Erdogan’s leadership style. This creates considerable tactical flexibility but lacks long-term stability and deep institutionalization. Consequently, Turkey faces macroeconomic instability (high inflation, lira depreciation) and tensions in relations with both the United States and the EU.

5.4. Summary comparison table

Criterion	Vietnam	India	Indonesia	Turkey
Doctrine	Strategic autonomy + Self-reliance	Multi-alignment	Bebas-Aktif	Transactional Autonomy
Institutionalization	Very high (Party leadership)	High (federal democracy)	Medium	Low (personalized)

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Criterion	Vietnam	India	Indonesia	Turkey
Consistency	High	Medium-high	High	Low
Tactical flexibility	High	Medium	Medium	Very high
Pressure from China	Very high (East Sea)	High (border)	Medium	Low
Military capacity	Medium	High (nuclear)	Low-medium	High
Distinctive feature	“Bamboo diplomacy”	Quad + NAM legacy	ASEAN centrality	Geopolitical bridge

6. ADAPTABILITY OF BAMBOO DIPLOMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF US-CHINA POLARIZATION

6.1. Nature and implications of “bamboo diplomacy”

“Bamboo diplomacy”—an image initiated by General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and further developed by General Secretary To Lam—symbolizes Vietnam’s foreign policy line after the 14th National Congress. The bamboo has deep roots (self-reliance—firmly anchored in national tradition and core interests), a straight trunk (firmness in principle—independence, sovereignty, no alliances), and the ability to bend with the wind without breaking (tactical flexibility—adapting to changing circumstances). The bamboo image carries Vietnamese cultural characteristics, distinct from Western diplomatic metaphors. While Western theories often classify diplomatic behavior in binary models (balance/bandwagon, hard/soft), bamboo diplomacy integrates seemingly contradictory elements: firm yet flexible, principled yet pragmatic, autonomous yet integrated (Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, 2024).

6.2. Achievements in the 2023–2026 period

In the context of comprehensive US-China competition in technology, supply chains, and ideology, bamboo diplomacy has enabled Vietnam to achieve many outstanding results. The Political Report assesses: “Foreign affairs have actively and effectively played a pioneering role, contributing to maintaining and consolidating a peaceful and stable environment and opening up a new situation unprecedented for national development” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 5). Specifically, from 2023 to 2026, Vietnam upgraded relations to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the United States (9/2023), Japan (11/2024), and Australia (3/2024), while maintaining and deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China (12/2023). Simultaneously upgrading relations with both the United States and China to the highest level clearly demonstrates a “multi-balancing” strategy—without leaning entirely toward either side. The Political Report notes: “Relations with countries and partners have deepened, stabilized, and developed sustainably, especially the upgrading and deepening of comprehensive strategic partnerships with major powers and important partners” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 5).

6.3. Challenges to bamboo diplomacy

However, bamboo diplomacy faces three increasingly large structural challenges:

First, technological polarization pressure: US-China competition in semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and 5G is creating a “technology wall” that forces countries to choose the standards and technological ecosystems of one side or the other. Vietnam sets the goal of “prioritizing development and gradually mastering production technology in certain emerging industries such as semiconductor industry, robotics and automation industry, and artificial intelligence” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 22), but actual capacity remains limited.

Second, supply chain pressure: The “China+1,” “friend-shoring,” and “near-shoring” strategies of the United States and its allies create opportunities but also pose challenges for Vietnam in managing complex economic relations with both sides. The Political Report acknowledges: “Protectionism, imposed tariff policies, and the risk of trade wars go hand in hand with the trend of adjusting global production and supply chains” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 15).

Third, pressure to choose sides on normative issues: Issues such as human rights, internet governance, labor standards, and environmental standards are increasingly becoming tools of competition between major powers, creating pressure on Vietnam to maintain a neutral stance.

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7. PROPOSAL FOR A PARTY-LED MULTILATERAL DIPLOMACY MODEL

7.1. Basis for the proposal

From the analysis of the 14th National Congress documents and international comparison, the study finds that Vietnam needs a multilateral diplomacy model suited to its specific political institutional characteristics and strategic context. The Political Report of the 14th National Congress laid the foundation for this model when it stated: “Promote and elevate multilateral diplomacy; uphold, protect, and promote the role of international law and the United Nations Charter; the role of an active, positive, important, and responsible member in multilateral mechanisms” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

The Party-led Multilateral Diplomacy Model (PLMD) is proposed on the basis of three principles:

Principle 1 – Unified Party leadership is the condition ensuring strategic consistency: Unlike multi-party democracies where foreign policy can change with electoral cycles, Vietnam's political system allows the maintenance of long-term strategic consistency. The Political Report emphasizes: “Ensure the unified leadership of the Party and the centralized management of the State over foreign affairs activities” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 33). The second lesson after 40 years of Doi Moi also affirms: “Maintaining and strengthening the leadership and ruling role and combat strength of the Communist Party of Vietnam is the decisive factor for every success” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 14).

Principle 2 – Multilateralization is the optimal method for middle powers to increase influence: In a complex multipolar order, multilateral mechanisms provide a more level playing field for middle powers than asymmetrical bilateral relations with major powers (Acharya, 2017; Ikenberry, 2020). Vietnam has clearly recognized this: “Proactively participate in building and shaping multilateral institutions” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

Principle 3 – The three pillars of foreign affairs create combined strength: The PLMD model utilizes the unique three-pillar structure of Vietnam's diplomacy—Party foreign affairs, State diplomacy, and people-to-people diplomacy—to create a multi-layered multilateral network.

7.2. Structure of the PLMD model

The proposed PLMD model consists of five interacting components:

(1) **Strategic Core:** The Central Committee, Politburo, and Secretariat play the role of formulating the line, determining strategic priorities, and allocating resources for multilateral diplomacy activities. The Political Report requires: “Pay attention to and promote strategic research, forecasting, and advisory work” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

(2) **Core Multilateral Ring:** Includes multilateral mechanisms of strategic importance: ASEAN, the United Nations, Mekong sub-regional cooperation, and APEC. This is the arena in which Vietnam invests the greatest resources and has the greatest influence. The goal is “together with ASEAN countries to strengthen effective cooperation, build a strong community, and consolidate ASEAN's solidarity and centrality in the regional architecture” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

(3) **Extended Multilateral Ring:** Includes economic cooperation frameworks (CPTPP, RCEP, FTAs), security forums (Shangri-La, ADMM+), and new linkage initiatives (Indo-Pacific, BRI). The strategy in this ring is “selective participation” and “proactive participation in building and shaping” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

(4) **Strategic Bilateral Network:** Comprehensive strategic partnerships, strategic partnerships, and comprehensive partnerships form a bilateral network supporting multilateral activities. The goal is “to maximize opportunities from comprehensive strategic partnerships, strategic partnerships, and comprehensive partnerships” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

(5) **Specialized Diplomacy Platform:** Includes economic diplomacy, technology diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and defense-security diplomacy. The Political Report emphasizes: “Promote comprehensive diplomacy serving development, with economic diplomacy and technology diplomacy as the focus” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34).

7.3. Operational mechanism

The PLMD model operates according to four principles:

Concentric principle: ASEAN is the innermost concentric circle, followed by Asia-Pacific linkage mechanisms, then global organizations. Each circle has its own appropriate strategy.

Interconnection principle: The three pillars of foreign affairs (Party, State, and People) operate synchronously across all circles, creating combined strength. Party foreign affairs paves the way for State diplomacy, while people-to-people diplomacy supports and expands.

Shared-interest principle: In each multilateral mechanism, Vietnam seeks “overlapping interest zones” with as many partners as possible, avoiding being drawn into exclusionary alliances.

Flexible adaptation principle: The model allows adjustment of focus and level of commitment in each circle according to changing circumstances, consistent with the lesson of “strategic consistency and firmness, tactical flexibility and suppleness” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 14).

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7.4. Comparative advantages of the PLMD model

Compared with the multilateralization models of other middle powers, Vietnam's PLMD model has three outstanding advantages: **Institutional advantage:** Centralized Party leadership enables synchronized coordination across diplomatic channels, avoiding the "policy fragmentation" often seen in multi-party democracies. The 2024–2025 organizational restructuring revolution has created a strong institutional foundation for foreign affairs operations: "reducing 34.9% of central-level units; reducing 46% of provincial-level administrative units" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 8).

Identity advantage: "Bamboo diplomacy" with its philosophy of "firm in principle yet flexible" creates an easily recognizable diplomatic identity respected by partners, distinct from Turkey's "transactional" image or India's "assertive" image.

Positional advantage: Vietnam is located at the center of Southeast Asia, at the intersection of continent and ocean, between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, providing conditions to play a "node" role in the regional multilateral network.

8. CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1. Challenges

The study identifies four main groups of challenges to the VSAM and PLMD models: First, internal challenge—the gap between ambition and capacity: The gap between the requirement of "self-reliance" and actual capacity in high technology, modern defense, and financial resources remains very large. The Political Report acknowledges: "Technological capacity and level remain weak; there is a lack of foundational industries and strategic technologies to serve as the core for promoting economic growth. Science, technology, and innovation have not yet become the main driving force for industrialization, modernization, and national development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 10). "The overarching risk is the risk of falling behind, especially in technology, and falling into the middle-income trap" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 16).

Second, external challenge—increasingly strong polarization pressure: US-China competition is expanding from trade to technology, finance, technical standards, and even ideology. The Political Report warns: "Conflicts, wars, and high-tech arms races are occurring in many regions, more dangerously, and the risk of large-scale war cannot be ruled out" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 15).

Third, institutional challenge—maintaining synchronized coordination: How to maintain synchronized coordination among the three pillars of foreign affairs in the face of increasingly complex cross-sectoral issues. The Political Report notes: "Implementation and organization of international commitments and agreements already signed have been slow. The combination of foreign affairs and integration with socio-economic development, national defense, and security remains limited in some aspects" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 12).

Fourth, foreign affairs human resource challenge: The requirement to build "a comprehensive, modern, professional diplomatic service with a contingent of cadres possessing firm political mettle, good moral qualities, and high professional qualifications" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 34) poses major challenges in training and developing human resources.

8.2. Opportunities

Vietnam is in an unprecedentedly favorable position thanks to four groups of opportunities:

Strategic opportunity: The "China+1" and "friend-shoring" strategies of the United States and its allies create opportunities to attract investment and shift supply chains into Vietnam. The Political Report records: "Economic growth in 2025 reached 8.02%, creating a solid foundation for the target of 10% or higher growth from 2026 onward" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 2).

Positional opportunity: After 40 years of Doi Moi, "the country's foundation, potential, position, and international prestige have been elevated, constituting an important foundation for the country to rise in the new era" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 16).

Technological opportunity: The Fourth Industrial Revolution, especially AI, semiconductors, and digital transformation, creates opportunities for "leapfrogging" if the right strategy is adopted.

Institutional opportunity: The 2024–2025 organizational streamlining revolution has created a strong institutional foundation, enabling faster and more effective policy implementation.

8.3. Policy recommendations

On the basis of the analysis, the study proposes five recommendations:

(1) Accelerate the building of technological self-reliance capacity: Focus investment on strategic technology sectors (semiconductors, AI, new energy) to narrow the gap between ambition and capacity, turning "self-reliance" from a slogan into actual strength.

(2) Further institutionalize the PLMD model: Build a national-level coordination mechanism for multilateral diplomacy, closely linking the three pillars of foreign affairs with economic, technological, and defense ministries and sectors.

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- (3) Develop “technology diplomacy” as a new pillar: In the context of US-China technological competition, Vietnam needs to build specialized diplomatic capacity in the technology field to seize opportunities and manage risks.
- (4) Improve the quality of foreign affairs human resources: Train a contingent of diplomatic cadres proficient in both political theory and modern professional skills, capable of operating effectively in a complex multilateral environment.
- (5) Build an early warning system for strategic affairs: Invest in strategic research, forecasting, and advisory capacity to proactively respond to changes in US-China relations and the East Sea situation.

9. CONCLUSION

Strategic autonomy and self-reliance, added at the 14th National Congress, are not merely strategic adjustments but an inevitable development of Vietnam's foreign policy line in the new era. As the Political Report affirms: “Our country has truly entered a new era—the era of the nation's rise” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 46). Through the VSAM model and the Party-led multilateral diplomacy model (PLMD) proposed in this study, it can be seen that Vietnam is building a distinct approach that harmoniously combines firmness and flexibility, internal strength and diplomacy, national tradition and the trends of the times. The centralized and unified leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam—a unique institutional variable not fully accounted for in Western models—is precisely the factor that creates the consistency and synchronized coordination capacity of Vietnamese diplomacy, an advantage that few middle powers possess. Compared with India, Indonesia, and Turkey, Vietnam's model demonstrates higher institutionalization, clearer strategic consistency, and tighter linkage between endogenous self-reliance and multilateral diplomacy. However, ultimate success will still depend on the ability to translate resolutions into concrete actions, especially in the context of increasingly fierce US-China competition and the persistent risk of “falling behind technologically.” The most important lesson drawn from the study is that strategic autonomy cannot exist without genuine self-reliance. As the fifth lesson after 40 years of Doi Moi summarized by the 14th National Congress: “strategic consistency and firmness, tactical flexibility and suppleness” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 14). Bamboo diplomacy, if nourished by a solid foundation of self-reliance and operated within an effective Party-led multilateral diplomacy model, will continue to be the tool that helps Vietnam not only survive but also prosper and contribute responsibly to peace and development in the region and the world, realizing the vision of “standing shoulder to shoulder with the world's powers as the aspiration of beloved President Ho Chi Minh” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026, p. 47).

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